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WASHINGTON WEEKLY
6 MAY 1980

Abe Rosenthal And The CIA

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WASHINGTON—Addressing the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Adm. Stansfield Turner, director, Central Intelligence Agency, asserted the right to use U.S. correspondents abroad for gathering intelligence in "exceptional circumstances."

The effect among the editors was as though the rural chapter of the Ottumwa, Iowa, PTA had just heard the newly appointed high school principal deliver an impassioned defense of—in certain circumstances—statutory rape.

"Do you think it is worthwhile," asked Abe Rosenthal of The New York Times, "to cast into doubt the ethical and professional position of every foreign correspondent?"

There was little dissent to the predominant press view which might be summarized thus:

Use a single correspondent in a CIA operation, and you cast doubt upon the independence and integrity of us all. Worse, you may place lives in jeopardy. Access to foreign sources will instantly dry up; information upon which the American people, and, indeed, the government may depend will not be forthcoming. The wall of separation between press and state will be breached; we would all be the losers.

Excuse the interruption. But, on this one, the admiral is right and Abe is wrong.

American correspondents serving abroad are already "citizens under suspicion." Nothing has made them more so than the public debate currently raging in the U.S. press. And why should U.S. journalists, in Third World countries, enjoy special guarantees and protections, unavailable, say, to those 53 Americans held in Tehran?

When the late Stewart Alsop entered an embassy abroad, so the story goes, he would boom out, "Who's the local spook?" If it was fine for Alsop to milk the "local spook" for information on arrival, was it ethically wrong for Alsop to share with his source, tidbits, impressions and information on departure?

Reading Hanson Baldwin's fine book, "The Crucial Years, 1939-1941," the other night, I was reminded of the well-kept wartime secret that it was an American Catalina flying boat, "loaned" to Great Britain and co-piloted by a U.S. naval officer, which sighted the crippled Bismarck in the North Atlantic. America was not then at war with Germany. Suppose it had been Howard K. Smith or William Shirer who had reported back to U.S. intelligence in Berlin—thence to British intelligence—the precise time of the Bismarck's departure from home port.

Why this particular press hostility toward the CIA?

Many American newsmen have cooperated with and been paid by the United States Information Agency, the Voice of America, HEW. Some can be seen daily and weekly on a public television network funds for which are provided by the Congress of the United States. Is every journalist who has accepted pay from public radio, or Public Broadcasting Service, compromised?

My friend, Professor Ernest Lefever, an ordained minister of 40 years, whose academic discipline is Christian ethics, testified on the matter recently before Congress:

"All American citizens, regardless of station or profession, have an equal obligation to protect the state and the institutions and values for which it stands. A garage mechanic, a politician and a preacher should all have an equal right to be patriotic. They have an equal obligation to serve the common good. All American citizens should be free to cooperate with the CIA, FBI, HEW, or any other U.S. agency, in the pursuit of legitimate national interests."

"There is no basic moral difference between cooperating with the CIA and any other U.S. agency."

Surely, one of those "legitimate national interests" is arresting the expansion of what Dr. Lefever correctly describes as the "brutal revolutionary conspiracy," centered in Moscow, "masquerading as a conventional state."

Rosenthal might reflect upon his absolutism. Would he fire his man in Moscow for the clandestine delivery of monies which might enable Sakharov & Company to survive in internal exile? Would he read out of the profession a journalist who came back from a holiday in Samarkand to report to the embassy nightly movements of tanks and troops toward the Afghan frontier?

Perhaps Rosenthal would feel ethically cheapened cooperating with the intelligence arm of the United States government that protects and defends the First Amendment rights of us all. That is his conscience speaking.

But he, and the like-minded leaders of this diverse, open fraternity known as the "press" ought not to have it written into the CIA charter, as criminal, an occasional cooperation with the CIA which a minority of us might consider not only patriotic, but heroic.